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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000823

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR RAISES HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS WITH  
FOREIGN MINISTER

Classified By: Ambassador Mark M. Boulware for reasons 1.4(b and d)

11. (C) Summary: The Ambassador conveyed concerns that lack of respect for due process in the prosecution of corruption and slander cases -- regardless of the merits of the case -- will negatively affect Mauritania's human rights image which, in turn, may inhibit the expansion of partnerships with the U.S. and other partners. The Foreign Minister took the point but did not provide much hope the Government would take actions to repair damage to its human rights image. End Summary.

12. (C) "Help Us Help You" Ambassador took advantage of a December 27 meeting with Foreign Minister Naha Mint Mouknass to raise concerns over the perceived lack of due process in the handling of a slander case against prominent website editor Hanevy Ould Dahah and corruption cases against three prominent Mauritanian businessmen. The Ambassador noted that Hanevy had not been released following the six month sentence he had served for violating "public decency." The processing of charges against the three businessmen did not appear to follow Mauritanian legal practice. The Ambassador stressed it was not our place to argue the guilt or innocence of the accused (indeed, the likelihood of substantial financial wrongdoing by the businessmen seemed obvious). Our concern was that lack of respect for due process diverted attention to the merits of the case to a discussion of Mauritania's human rights practices. The Ambassador underscored that the 2008 coup d'etat had effectively blocked Mauritanian access to key programs like the Millennium Challenge Account because of the negative impact on good governance indicators maintained by Freedom House and the World Bank. The Ambassador urged the Government to handle the cases with transparency and strict adherence to Mauritanian legal procedure. He noted that the 2009 Human Rights Report would, of necessity, handle the two cases in a negative fashion if there was not some positive action before the end of the calendar year.

13. (C) "Yes -- but..." The Foreign Minister said she appreciated the way in which the Ambassador raised his concerns and accepted that the media attention around the two cases was having a negative impact on the Government's image. That said, she provided little indication the Government would resolve the problem.

14. (C) Irresponsible Journalism: She saw Hanevy as an irresponsible and slanderous journalist who undermined the credibility of all Mauritanian media. She noted that she had been a victim herself of repeated attacks on her personal life (Comment: These have included rumors of having slept with a host of powerful politicians including Qaddhafi and rumors of a sex video of the Minister with one of Aziz's main political backers. End Comment). She doubted that six months in prison will change Hanevy's journalistic style and suggested "he has to be careful. I can accept these kinds of attacks, but there are conservative, illiterate desert tribesmen in my family who would likely settle accounts their own way and without my knowledge if he were to insult my

person again." The Minister suggested she was surprised herself that Hanevy had not been released at the end of his sentence but noted (in what we assume may be the government's tactic) that there had been 17 complaints against Hanevy when he was detained and that several more had since been filed. She held out the possibility that Hanevy may face further prosecution having served time for only a single complaint.

15. (C) The Biggest Thieves: The Minister said the Government had received multiple appeals to release the accused businessmen but countered that, "everyone ignores that these people stole (millions of dollars) from the Mauritanian people. Nobody seems to care when someone who steals to feed himself is detained, but they are all concerned about these biggest of thieves." She recognized that the politicization of the case had increased the pressure but said, "we are building the foundation (of a corruption-free government), so these first few blocks have to be solidly planted." Mouknass suggested leading opposition political leaders were making a tactical mistake of allying themselves with the businessmen's cause since the common Mauritanian will see them as defending those who stole from the people. While affirming the desirability of taking on corruption, Ambassador noted that to be successful such efforts had to be seen as transparent and apolitical.

16. (C) Comment: Post will be reporting SEPTEL on these cases. The case of journalist Hanevy Ould Dahah is of greatest concern since it seems most clearly related to the settling of accounts with the editor of the most virulent anti-coup / anti-Aziz website in Mauritania. It is true that Hanevy's "TAQADOUMY" website often runs stories of dubious

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credibility. Indeed, Mauritanian cyber-journalists admit that the requirement to get a story out instantaneously before the competition precludes the chance for even the rudimentary fact-checking of print media. That said, pro-Aziz media is equally loose with the truth and the Hanevy case can only be seen as retaliation against the President's biggest media critic and a warning to other journalists. The businessmen pose a similar problem. Like almost anyone of wealth or power in Mauritania, it is almost a given that they are corrupt. The three involved are perhaps among the biggest but there are many others. As all three come from clans that opposed Aziz during the coup, the charge of political settling of scores is inevitable. While even the accused lawyers will privately admit wrong doing by their clients, the opposition is successfully showing errors in judicial procedure that make the discussion more about Aziz' settling of scores instead of the substantial wrongdoing of the businessmen. End Comment.  
BOULWARE